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### Yemen's Peace Process

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# Yemen's Peace Process: Dilemmas facing the Southern Transitional Council

**Robert Forster**

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**The continued exclusion of the Southern Transitional Council from peace talks may cause future conflicts in Yemen, but the inclusion of STC presents multiple dilemmas for the Yemeni government.**

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Excluded from the Geneva III peace process talks in September 2018 geared towards ending the country's three-year conflict, Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC) faces a dilemma. At odds with the Yemeni government, the STC was founded in May 2017 by Aden's former-governor Aydrus al-Zubaydi, after he was fired by President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi two weeks earlier. In terms of representing Southern interests, the Council has since emerged as South Yemen's most prominent and well organised political actor. Its barring from talks at the hand of the President Hadi is likely to continue due to the dilemma the Council poses to the central government as well as the limited mandate of the UN Special Envoy's Office to Yemen.

The continued exclusion of the Southern Council may become the catalyst for future conflicts in Yemen putting pressure on an

already vulnerable and war-torn population. But for the Yemeni government, the STC exacerbates multiple dilemmas common to centre-periphery conflicts.

### **Dilemmas of Inclusion**

Should Hadi grant Zubaydi access to peace negotiations, he will confer legitimacy onto an organisation whose aims are contrary to the government's. Indeed, although STC officials have issued multiple conflicting statements on its aims in the year after its inauguration, the primary stated aim is creating an independent state in South Yemen free from "the occupation of Sanaa and its tyrannical regime."

However, key to its aims is also maintaining good relations with the Arab Coalition, of which the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a key political and financial backer of the Council, as well as combating terrorism. STC rhetoric has regularly framed the continued

presence of Hadi's government in Aden and pro-Hadi forces found in seven districts in al-Dhalea governorate as part of the 'Northern occupation' and demanded their departure. This is stretched further by occasional claims made by Southern activists that the Hadi government is 'infiltrated by Islah' and that the Islah political party – which has a wing affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood – is “born of terrorism and extremism” and a reason for insecurity in Aden.

The 'reward' of recognition by Hadi by providing access to peace negotiations may also further encourage other groups to take up arms against the Yemeni government to secure a form of political autonomy. Indeed, the STC has been criticised by members of the central government for adopting 'coup' tactics similar to the Houthis in the North, who took control with the capture of Sanaa in September 2014. Consolidating their position,

the Houthis forced the Hadi government to re-locate to the southern port city of Aden in February 2015 sparking the armed intervention by the Saudi-led Arab Coalition on March 23, 2015.

Members of the Hadi government argue that the events of January 2018 had similar motivations. On January 21, 2018, Zubaydi announced his ultimatum, namely to shuffle the cabinet of the Yemeni government and sack Prime Minister Ahmed bin Daghr. When the deadline passed, armed clashes broke out across the Adeni neighbourhoods of Khur Maksar, Mansoura, and Dar Saad, killing around 30 and eventually forcing an intervention by the Arab Coalition as STC-aligned militias captured military camps belonging to the Presidential Protection Forces and almost captured the Presidential Palace in al-Maashiq, Aden.

Bolstered by their military victory against pro-Hadi forces, the STC initially

appeared to have taken control of Aden. However, by April 12, Prime Minister bin Daghr returned with a small entourage of ministers and by April 22, Hadi re-confirmed his refusal to reshuffle the government. Meanwhile, the STC faced increased pressure due to its support for Tariq Saleh, the nephew of the late former-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who became aligned with the STC through their Emirati benefactors, which allowed Tariq to re-arm and re-group after their exodus from northern Yemen. In Spring 2018, as its one-year anniversary approached, the STC also faced political pressure from other southern actors in al-Mahra and Hadramawt and from organisations such as the Supreme Council of the Revolutionary Forces of the South.

Another factor that remains unclear for the consolidation of the STC is the degree of command it holds over various military units in the South. Although these units

appear to align their interests with the STC, there are conflicting reports as to their command structure. The Security Belt of Aden and Lahj, as well as the Shabwani and Hadrami Elite forces, according to Adnan al-Kaf – head of the STC's Economic and Finance department – are not linked to the STC. Similarly, Commander 'Abu Zahra' al-Mahrami of the 'Brigade of Giants' issued a statement in June 2018 refuting allegations of links between the 'Giants' and the STC. These reports appear to confirm Hani bin Brayk's statement that, "the [Council] does not have any armed forces affiliated with it" although he also added that Zubaydi is a commander of the Southern Resistance.

### **Looking forward**

Regarding the Yemeni government, it is difficult to see the STC reconcile with them in the short term due to opposing aims. According to unconfirmed reports, the STC's official spokesman, Saleh bin Farid al-Awlaqi,



made an attempt to reconcile with the Yemeni government in mid-March 2018, allegedly meeting with Yemeni government officials in Riyadh. This report was denied. However, after the return of bin Daghr to Aden in April, STC rhetoric incorporated various caveats, including that they were not “against the legitimacy of President Hadi” or actually attempting to oust bin Daghr, but rather targeting the interior minister, Ahmed al-Maysari. In late-June 2018 another unconfirmed report noted that the STC’s Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Muhammad Ali al-Shadadi, was leading a mediation effort for the Council to meet with Hadi. A few days later on June 28, Ahmed bin Brayk was quoted by Sputnik saying, “The President is also called upon to extend his hand to his brothers in the Transitional Council, and this is not wrong” – but he also noted that this was not an attempt to get in good standing with the Yemeni government. The

government's opinion on the matter, however, was expressed by bin Daghr in an interview with the Egyptian daily, Youm Sebaa, namely that the government aimed to delay dealing with the STC, until after the post-conflict period, where elections would provide the outlet for conflict resolution.

It is possible that if the Transitional Council's members manage to further consolidate their position and bolster their regional political backing, they may gain access to peace negotiations through peaceful means. In May 2018, Zubaydi called for a 'South-South' dialogue to take place in Cairo and Abu Dhabi between various historical figures including Presidents Ali Salim al-Beidh (an STC supporter) and Ali Muhammad Nasser (an STC sceptic), as well as Khalid Bahah (Hadi's former Prime Minister). In addition, few months after his resignation, Aden's former governor, Abd al-Aziz al-Miflahi, reportedly stated that the "[Council] is a real

partner and should not be underestimated.”

Indeed, the STC should not be underestimated. Despite accusations of alleged corruption and human rights violations – including extra judicial killings and illegal detention, as well as their inability to provide services such as electricity and running water – attempts at shedding doubt on the cohesion of Council appears to be mostly hyperbolic. Indeed, over the last year, the STC consolidated much of its institutional structure across the South down to the directorate level (a work in progress), while fending off various political challenges. Despite the Council's potential to continue conflict on the regional level, this has yet to translate to national level influence. However, the degree of national-level influence is liable to change in a rapidly changing security environment. Domestically, the STC's close relationship with the UAE remains one of their opponent's main critiques

against them and their relationship shed uncertainty on how the Council may navigate any potential shifts in Emirati regional policy.

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### About the author

**Robert Forster** is a research analyst with the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) at the University of Edinburgh. His work on the Yemeni peace process has been published by *Middle East Journal* and *Middle East Policy*. This analysis is a product of ongoing research. Any mistakes are the author's own.